Okanagan Similkameen School District Review Report

District Name: Okanagan Similkameen

District Number: No. 53

Superintendent: Brian Fox

Date of Visit: February 16 -19, 2003

Team Chair: Mike Downey, Superintendent of Schools, S.D. 59

Team Members: Christine Dickinson, Earl Hockin, Claudia Roch, Jaye Sawatsky, Terri Watson

Summary of Process

The Okanagan Similkameen School District Review is one of twenty reviews being conducted by the Ministry of Education this year.

The purpose of the School District Review is to provide feedback and recommendations to the district, the Ministry of Education and the public regarding the District's work in improving student achievement by:

- Reviewing district and school achievement data;
- Reviewing the District Accountability Contract and School Plans to improve student achievement;
- Making recommendations to the Board and to the Minister about improving student achievement, and
- Identifying promising practices that will assist other districts and schools in their efforts to improve student achievement.

The District Review Team is appreciative of the support it received from the District in addressing the objectives of the district visit. At both school and district levels, the team found an openness and willingness to engage thoughtfully and meaningfully in the discussion and review process.

Initially the Team held a meeting with the Chair of the Board, senior district staff, and representatives of employee groups. Subsequent visits to each school provided opportunity for discussions related to the ten key "points of inquiry" forming the structure of the review process. In each school, the Team met with a focus group, typically made up of principals and vice-principals, teachers, support staff, PAC executive members, SPC representatives and additional parents. In a number of schools the focus group also included students and Aboriginal members of the school community. Team members also met with a group at the Okanagan Similkameen Learning Centre in Keremeos. The Team was impressed with the number of participants and the broad representation of perspectives in each focus group.

In addition to these visits, the team reviewed:

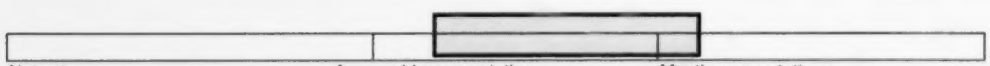
- The District's Accountability Contract;
- School Plans;
- District and school data provided by the Ministry of Education, the School District and individual schools.

At the conclusion of its visit the Team met with the School District's senior administration and Board to present a summary of this report.

Throughout this visit, the Team was impressed with the District's commitment to enhancing student success and the evident collegiality and leadership throughout the District.

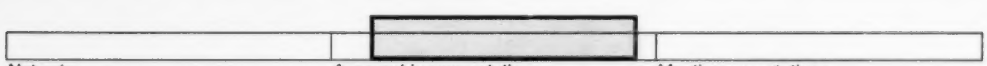
Observations in Key Areas - Focus on Student Achievement

1. *Goals: "Improving districts have a strong instructional focus. This focus is made visible in clear goals for improving student achievement."*



   - The District's reading comprehension goal is focused clearly on student achievement.
   - The District has developed a goal related to increasing student participation rates in provincial examinations. The Review Team recognizes that the intent of the District's goal is to increase student success. The Team recommends that the District more explicitly articulate student success or achievement as a focus of this goal.
   - The Review Team recommends that the District consider formulating its safety goal as a goal related more directly to student learning.
   - The District has set two goals to increase graduation rates. The Review Team encourages the District to describe these goals in a form that would facilitate specific goal setting in both elementary and secondary schools.

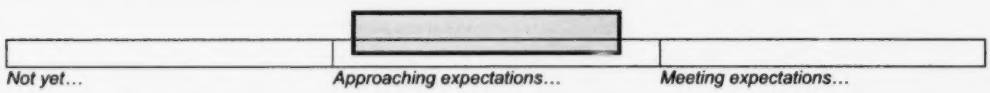
2. *Rationale: "Improving districts have a thorough research and community-based set of reasons for the selection of their student achievement goals."*



   - District goals are consistent with priorities established in the District.

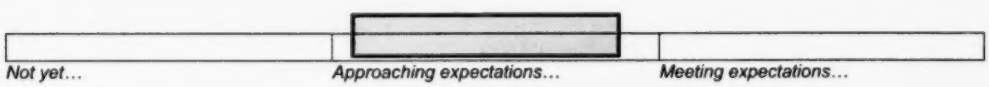
- Provincial data have been considered by the District leadership team in the development of goals. The District has acknowledged the need for additional data.
- The District has included a goal that responds to the particular needs of Aboriginal students.
- To facilitate understanding of each goal, the Team recommends the inclusion of statements of rationale in District and School Plans.

3. *Data: "Improving districts have identified at least three sources of evidence including classroom, school and district/provincial levels. The analysis of this evidence has informed the selection of the district goals."*



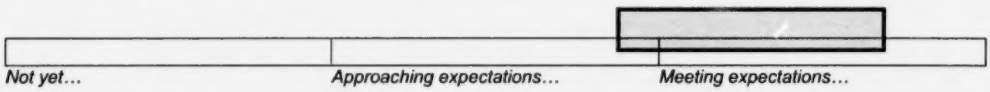
- The need for valid and reliable achievement data is clearly understood at both district and school levels.
- A number of schools expressed considerable interest in having the District facilitate the identification and implementation of classroom assessment tools.

4. *Strategies: "Improving districts have a well-organized, focused improvement plan in place. The strategies selected to achieve the goals are an intelligent blend of research, best practice and innovative thinking."*



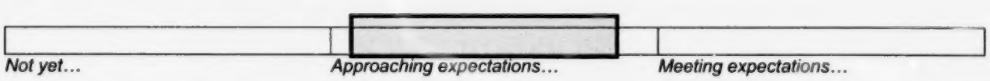
- The District defines its strategies in broad terms that allow schools to adopt more specific strategies appropriate to their needs. The Team supports this approach and, at the same time, encourages the District to expand its role in coordinating strategy development.
- The District has established clear expectations that schools develop and implement thoughtful and effective strategies for improving student achievement.
- The Review Team noted a lack of alignment in some School Plans between strategies and goals.
- In a number of schools the Team noted school-wide commitment to goal driven strategies and enthusiasm for the results being achieved.

5. *Structures: "Improving districts have shifted structures – resources, time, organization – to get the results they want. This includes effectively differentiating resources in the areas of highest need for improvement."*



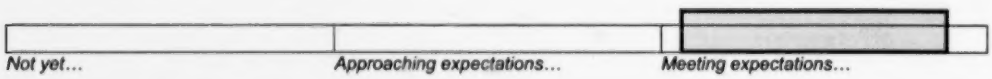
- The District clearly recognizes and responds, through differential support and resource allocation, to identified school needs.
- Schools have some autonomy with regard to allocating resources in ways appropriate to their goals.
- A number of schools are actively considering or implementing structural/organizational changes designed to enhance goal attainment.

6. *Results: "Improving districts get improved student learning results – at the classroom, school and district levels."*



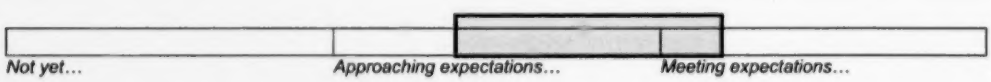
- The District has established targets for all of its goals.
- The District is clearly focused on achievement-related results in its Accountability Contract. With few exceptions, School Plans are also focused on results.
- The Team encourages the District to consider assessment strategies that would support continuous monitoring.
- As the District develops or adopts further measures of achievement, it will be increasingly well positioned to monitor and track its progress.
- The Team encourages schools to review indicators to ensure they measure intended outcomes.

7. *Communication: "Improving districts ensure that both the education community and the broader community being served are aware of the improvement goals and the progress being made."*



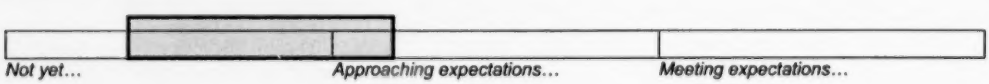
- The District and schools use a wide variety of strategies to communicate goals to the public.
- Schools throughout the district inform parents of goals and progress toward goal attainment. School communication strategies are generally effective and appropriate for each school community.

8. *Teamwork: "Improving districts have a dynamic and interactive strategy for connecting school and district goals. School uniqueness and school-district directions are both valued."*



- District and school goals are closely connected.
- District goals were the major determinants of school goals.
- A proposed district planning model clearly articulates the relationship between district priorities and goals and School Plans.

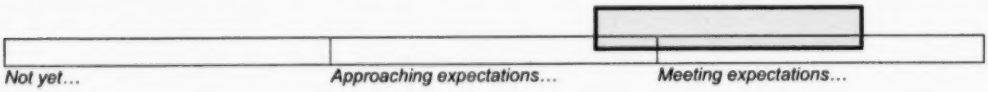
9. *Teamwork – District and Parent Involvement: "Improving districts work as a team with parents, including specific groups of parents."*



- The District has identified the need for a more inclusive process for the development of goals. The introduction of School Planning Councils, together with the District's proposed planning model will help to address this need.
- The District has provided support and exercised clear leadership with regard to School Planning Councils.
- There was some evidence of genuine consultation with parents in determining school goals.

- Several schools identified a need for innovative strategies to build stronger connections between their schools and diverse groups within their communities.

10. *Leadership /Teamwork: "Improving districts are led by district leaders who have a clear vision for and commitment to school improvement and improving student achievement. Principals, vice-principals, and teacher and parent leadership is encouraged and systematically developed – with a focus on improving student learning."*



- The District Leadership Team has communicated the expectation that schools develop plans and strategies that focus on student achievement.
- District and school staff noted on several occasions that, in a small school district, many people must take on leadership roles. Examples of shared leadership were clearly evident in many schools throughout the District.
- The Review Team observed considerable collegiality and informal leadership within schools.

Strengths

The Okanagan Similkameen School District has many strengths. In particular, the Team noted:

- A high level of commitment and collegial support in many schools, with regard to school goals;
- District support for staff development aligned with school and district goals;
- Clear leadership at all levels, with regard to promoting student success;
- Aboriginal language and culture programs in many schools.

Promising Practices

- The District's Leadership Team has initiated a "school walk through" process designed to provide schools with feedback regarding instructional practices.
- The District's proposed planning model provides an understandable overview of the desired interaction among the elements of school, district and Board planning.
- A "Primary Community Council" is in the formative stages in one community. This will bring together early primary teachers, Aboriginal pre-school staff and community pre-school staff as a community early intervention network.

Recommendations

- Continue to develop, in consultation with schools and School Planning Councils, a district model connecting district priorities, School Plans, and district accountability goals.
- Consider developing (or identifying) and supporting district-wide use of classroom assessment measures to supplement provincial data.
- Develop and support the implementation of specific district strategies aligned with each goal.
- Continue to assist schools and School Planning Councils in the effective use of data.
- Review the content and format of the District's Accountability Contract document to ensure it is a clear and comprehensive communication and planning tool.